
THE DISAM JOURNAL

of international Security Assistance Management

Spring 1999, Vol. 21 No. 3

"Strategic Partnership": The Case For Singapore

By

**Colonel Robert C. McAdams, USAF, ODC Chief,
Major David S. Hyres, USA Army Actions Officer,
and LCDR Carey E. Mathews, USNR**

In 1990, the United States maintained approximately 135,000 personnel in the Pacific Theater. By 1998, United States personnel in the Pacific had been reduced to 100,000. Worldwide, Army divisions, Navy aircraft carrier battle groups, and Air Force fighter wings have been reduced by a third. Overseas basing is a shadow of its former strength. At the same time, American engagements across the globe have increased by a factor of four.

As America shifts military assets between theaters to engage crises, the potential exists for some to view this as a lack of commitment and interest. For example, when the United States reacted to the crisis in the Persian Gulf early in 1998, Pacific Theater commanders were left with zero carriers. If a crisis had erupted in the Pacific and a carrier was dispatched to address the crisis, the closest port for maintenance (if the carrier had been damaged) would have been Japan. In the twenty-first century, America needs the ability to rapidly shift limited, valuable military assets between theaters and re-introduce them again should the need exist. Regardless of the status or location of these assets, America must be able to continue to meet its commitments, reassure its friends, and deter potential adversaries.

As the world steps across the threshold into the coming century, security assistance takes on added importance. The United States is actively establishing "Strategic Partnerships" with friends across the globe. Each relationship is being considered on its relative merits. In one case, the relationship may be based on access granted to United States forces. In another instance, the relationship may rest on a highly developed logistics infrastructure and the incorporation of American equipment into a host nation's defense infrastructure. In every instance, security assistance plays a vital role. Training, education, and equipment provided to other nations by the United States allow America to effectively execute its national security policy.

The question that must be continuously asked and answered is "Which countries should be identified as strategic partners, and what level of investment should America make in these countries?" The United States recognizes that future crises may depend on the element of time. If the United States cannot respond quickly, the situation may deteriorate so that the eventual American response results in increased military losses of personnel and equipment. Equally as

important, the United States may lose the opportunity to resolve the crisis in a manner that preserves American interests. This article addresses the case for Singapore. Although one of the world's newer countries, Singapore has come a great distance in a relatively short time. The current United States-Singaporean relationship is strong and the future is bright. As you read this article, imagine the possibilities that the American-Singaporean relationship can create in the Pacific. But just as important, consider the application of this model to other partners in the world.

Singapore: A Pearl of Southeast Asia

David fought Goliath during the biblical battle centuries ago, but the story is still an important analogy for skill overcoming size. Not surprisingly, Singapore is a country that models itself on David. Singapore is a mere 240 square miles in size. The main island is surrounded by 60 smaller ones. By comparison, Rhode Island, America's smallest state is a monstrous 1,212 square miles. It's not much real estate to work with. Since the country's independence in 1965, a remarkable economy and societal structure have developed. Today, despite an economic crisis gripping the region, Singapore has weathered the storm relatively unscathed, with substantial reserves and zero foreign debt. The framework that has allowed this "Asian Pearl" to blossom has been thirty-three years of continuous peace. Understandably, the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) are very proud of the part they have played in this success story. Its geographic position at the southern tip of the Malaysian Peninsula and postage stamp size leaves most Americans unsure of its location. Sure, they may have heard the name, but where is it hidden? You can be mildly amused to read some of the mail that comes to the United States Embassy. Addresses include "Singapore, China" and "Singapore, Malaysia." Even if people are not entirely sure where Singapore is located, people around the world know "Singapore."

Working in the Office of Defense Cooperation (ODC) and living in Singapore are daily marvels attesting to what this country has created. With a mere three million people, and virtually no natural resources, Singapore has gone from a sleepy port city (and one with much of its infrastructure in ruins) at the end of World War II to a world leader in many categories. Singapore has built the world's busiest port in terms of daily tonnage. Its airport is consistently rated as one of the world's best. The island incorporates an ultra-modern transportation system without peer. It is the ninth largest trading partner with the United States. It follows only Houston and Rotterdam in terms of amount of oil refined, and is the world's top location for storing oil.

Average Singaporeans earn a median income of \$26,000 dollars, ninth largest in the world. Singaporean students are considered to be the world's best educated in math and science. Singapore is rated either first or second as the world's freest economy in which to start a new business. Singapore has been at the forefront of the so-called "Asian Tigers" in converting what had been relatively backward economies into world powerhouses. In virtually every area that a country's prosperity can be measured, Singaporeans have excelled.

Historical race divisions between the Malays and Chinese contributed to the formation of Singapore as an independent country in 1965 when Singapore was forced to leave predominantly Muslim Malaysia in 1965. Today, Singapore is a predominantly Chinese country with 77 percent of the population composed of ethnic Chinese. Malays comprise 14 percent, Indians seven percent, and persons of other ethnic groups make up the remainder of the population.

Bordering the country are Southeast Asian giants. Indonesia, largely Muslim and with over 200 million people is a behemoth. Malaysia follows with 20 million people. Recognizing the

reality of the situation, Singapore has sought to maintain good relations with its two neighbors since its independence. There have been bumps in the road, some bigger than others. The recent economic crisis in the region and political and economic difficulties in both Indonesia and Malaysia have brought some strains in Singapore's relationships with its two neighbors. This follows 1997 in which forest fires on the Indonesian Island of Sumatra blanketed Singapore in a thick smoke for months. The fires caused illness, economic disruption, and frustration in every regional country.

A long-term consideration for the country is its own affluence. The downside to such widespread prosperity is that there is a growing decrease in the number of marriages and a consequent decrease in the birth rate. Singapore's population is quickly approaching the point of stagnation and eventual decline. In every year of this decade there has been a decline in the number of people getting married. This has largely been due to the good economic times that the country has enjoyed. As numerous multinational companies have located here, there has been roughly full-employment. As more women have entered the labor force, they have delayed getting married or have put it off entirely. This trend has progressed over the past decade as the median age of the country rose to 32.2 years from 27.8 years of age.

All of this is not a mere recitation of the facts and figures from Singapore's chamber of commerce; these are important assets serving as building blocks for the country's defense. Without the local economy, without the corresponding educational system, without far-sighted leadership, none of the backbone of Singapore's defense architecture would be possible.

Complementing Singapore's vision of itself is its relationship with the United States. Careful planning and a commitment to integrate itself into the security fabric of Asia have resulted in a robust economy enabling Singapore to operate at the leading edge of technology. As Singapore continually searches the globe for the latest in operating capability, the United States has consistently emerged as a security assistance partner. However, the relationship between Singapore and the United States is reciprocal-benefiting the United States as well.

In 1989, America began to withdraw from the Philippines, leaving the United States with no stopping points between Guam in the Western Pacific and Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. Both Singapore and the United States recognized an opportunity to strengthen their relationship, continue to ensure regional stability, and lay a firm foundation for a "strategic partnership". On November 13, 1990 Singapore's Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew signed an accord with Vice-President Quayle to allow American air and naval forces to routinely pass through Singapore and formalize access to facilities in Singapore. The agreement also established the framework for Singaporeans to train in the United States. From a humble beginning, the American-Singaporean partnership has been an important security linchpin ensuring America's continued military presence in the region. Access to facilities in Singapore is a significant foundation for smooth, uninterrupted operations in critical areas of the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia.

While not every country welcomes the United States as warmly as Singapore has done, Singapore views its position as a stabilizing regional influence very seriously. As part of that equation, Singapore has effectively used its financial strength and partnership with the United States. The government of Singapore has foreign reserves approaching \$70 billion United States dollars. Constitutionally, Singapore may spend no more than six percent of its gross domestic product for defense. Typically, spending does not exceed four percent of GDP. That translates into a defense budget annually close to \$6 billion Singapore dollars, or roughly \$4 billion U.S. dollars.

Singapore and ASEAN

Singapore has worked quietly and firmly through diplomatic channels at all times to try and resolve differences with its neighbors. Much of the regional diplomatic work is accomplished through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This diplomatic body currently comprises every nation in the region with the exception of Cambodia, whose membership is pending.

Importantly, the United States recognizes ASEAN's "independent spirit." American protests were ignored in 1997 when Burma was admitted to the body. ASEAN has set its own course. Despite disagreements over the admission of Burma, the body has been remarkable for its ability to provide a forum for member nations to resolve differences without acrimony.

ASEAN has been one of the key institutions that have allowed Asia's "Tiger" economies to prosper. Its members have managed to settle disputes, avoid most public quarrels, and generally get along with each other. This environment has allowed ASEAN nations to focus on economic prosperity instead of being distracted by regional conflicts. Consequently, valuable Singaporean resources can be invested in the economies of its neighbors. Singapore has long felt that its survival would be assured if it was more deeply involved in the economies of other Asian countries. This has led Singaporean companies to invest billions of dollars in Malaysia, Indonesia, Burma, Thailand, and China. Further, through the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum and the World Trade Organization (WTO), in addition to ASEAN, Singapore has been a strong proponent of free trade and reducing barriers to world trade and investment.



From a Singaporean perspective, this has resulted in a military focused upon deterrence. This should not imply, however, that Singapore does not continue to face diplomatic and military challenges. Diplomacy will continue to be the cornerstone for Singapore's involvement in the region. As an element of diplomacy, the SAF must be capable of addressing security concerns across the spectrum of conflict. Among regional concerns is the continuing conflict of claims to the Spratly Islands, and continuing territorial and border disputes. Nearly all of the countries on the periphery of the South China Sea have claims on the islands including Vietnam, the

Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Taiwan, and China. Although Singapore does not have a claim on the islands, the degree of involvement of fellow ASEAN nations could make Singapore's position uncomfortable.

As every other nation would in its own sphere of interest, Singapore views each weapon system introduced into the region with concern. Thus, the introduction of advanced technology weapons, such as theater ballistic missiles and submarines optimized for littoral operations, are potential threats from other regional powers wishing to assert their influence in the region. Because its land size does not give it depth of operations to trade space for time, technology must be harnessed to maximize Singapore's response to threatening crises. Similarly, Singapore's relatively small population cannot successfully counter potential challenges from countries using superior numbers to overwhelm smaller opponents. New technologies and systems introduced into the region equate to capabilities which could place the SAF at a disadvantage. Singapore must be constantly vigilant to ensure that its interests are adequately protected.

Overview of the Armed Forces

Singapore has invested billions of dollars on American security assistance over the last decades. In the past few years, the Singapore's Ministry of Defense (MINDEF) has invested nearly two and-a-half billion dollars in American equipment and training, the majority of that for aircraft. Singapore operates a mix of F-16s, A-4s, F-5s, C-130s, E-2s, CH-47s, UH-1s and, most recently, added KC-135s to their American-built fleet. Further orders have been placed for additional F-16s and CH-47s. As Singapore continues its long-term modernization investment, America will continue to be an ever-strengthening partner. The enduring relationship between Singapore and the United States has been a major factor that consistently ensures the stability of the region and lays the foundation for future growth and prosperity.

Divided into three branches, the SAF is among the most integrated in the world. The Army, Navy, and Air Force are designed and trained to work as a seamless operational force. On a manpower level the Army has 45,000 active duty soldiers. The Navy has 4,500 active sailors and the Air Force possesses 6,000 active airmen. These full-time soldiers are supplemented by as many as 250,000 reservists who can be mobilized on short notice. All able-bodied males, at the age of 18, are required to serve a term in the armed forces, ranging from 24 to 30 months. Those who do not stay on active duty remain reservists up to the age of 40-50, depending upon their rank. These reservists spend up to 40 days a year in training. This philosophy in the view of MINDEF provides maximum impact for every man and woman in uniform. From either a manpower or economic perspective, Singapore cannot afford to duplicate functions. The Singapore Armed Forces Training Institute (SAFTI) is one example underlining seamlessness. This school emphasizes integration of the three services at every level of officer training.

Singapore links this philosophy to combat operations through an advanced (Command, Control, Communications, and Computers) C4 network. Located in the armed forces new headquarters at Bukit Gombak, the military has created a C4 center controlled at the top by a central staff and integrated down to the unit level. This system has features that span the gamut from increased use of fiber-optic transmission lines to the use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) and satellite imagery. The Air Force's RF-5E "Tigereye" tactical reconnaissance fighters augment UAV coverage to plug any holes that exist and ensure that information reaches its needed and intended destinations. Finally, the advent of satellite imagery lays the strategic groundwork for tactical exploitation. The goal is for every platform to be able to transmit and share

information resulting in a seamless flow of information from commanders to field units and from the field to the headquarters.

The current fleet of Scout UAVs has performed superbly but is being considered for replacement and upgrade to maintain pace with the advance of technology. In the reconnaissance and surveillance arena, Singapore is considering whether to upgrade or replace its E-2C aircraft. The Republic of Singapore Air Force desires commonality with the United States in addition to strengthening its position on the leading edge of technology. As a result there is interest in multiple C4 systems and additional high-technology systems.

Singapore is unique in the region in that it has forces represented in as many as ten countries worldwide. It recently signed a defense pact with South Africa that will allow for training of troops in South Africa. Because of space limitations for training on the island, Singapore bases a good number of its personnel and hardware overseas. The advantages of bases overseas are numerous. Other countries have room for training not possessed by Singapore. Overseas basing offers Singapore the military perspective of other countries. Additionally, overseas basing allows Singapore to position and maintain its military equipment away from Singapore.

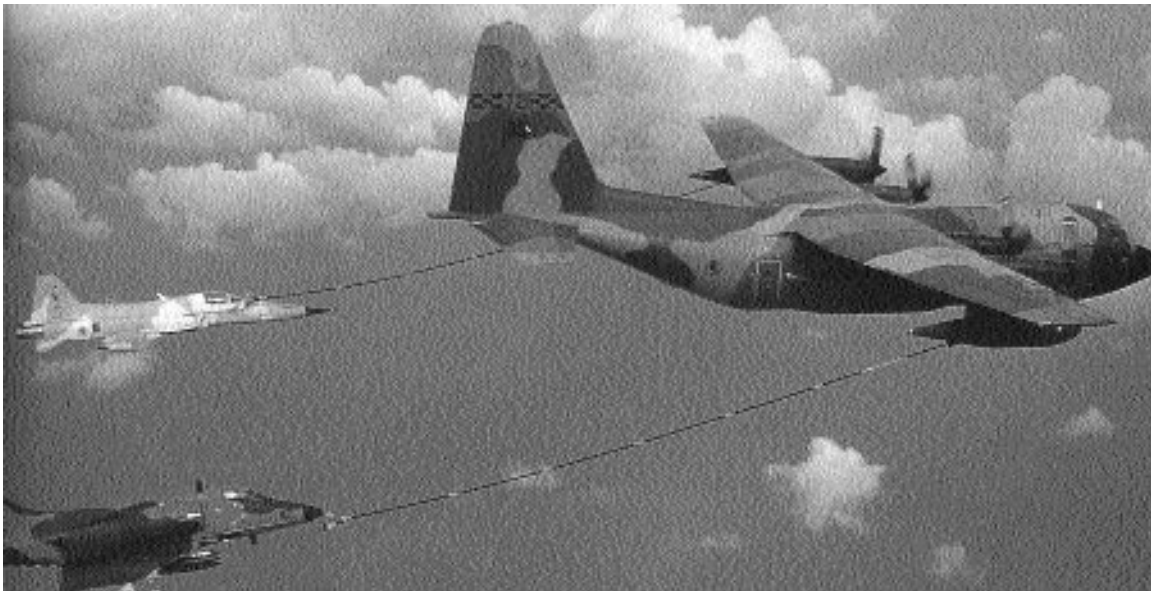


For example, when Singapore bought F-16s, they initially based them exclusively in the United States. The unique dimension of this partnership is a semi-permanent relationship that Singapore shares with the United States. Singapore has four locations in the United States from which training occurs for its military: Luke AFB in Phoenix, Arizona; Cannon AFB in Clovis, New Mexico; McConnell AFB in Wichita, Kansas; and Grand Prairie, Texas, just outside of Dallas. Collectively, these locations conduct training in F-16 fighters, KC-135 tankers, and CH-

47 helicopters. The command structure in each location is also integrated with American and Singaporean personnel.

It would be easy, and incorrect, to say that Singapore is the sole beneficiary of this relationship. The Singaporeans have a strong aviation culture that is committed to reducing "risk." As a result, although the concept of risk management is a relatively new phenomenon in the U.S. military, managing risk is deeply ingrained in Singapore's culture. However, the U.S. and Singapore view managing risk somewhat differently. From Singapore's perspective, risk management is designed to limit operations that could possibly go awry. From the U.S. perspective, risk management is a vehicle to ensure that the level of risk is known, controlled if possible, and then accepted by the appropriate level of leadership. Interesting dialogue occurs in briefing rooms and in social settings on what "appropriate risk" means. From Singapore's perspective, however, risk management extends beyond flying into procurement as well.

Because of demographic changes, the portion of the population available for military service is shrinking. This trend has directly translated itself to Singapore's military organization. Infantry battalions have been reduced from 800 to 600 personnel. Armored units have adjusted their manpower from 840 to 730 personnel. However, manpower reductions do not necessarily equate to reduced capability. The new MAN GHH Leguan (8X8) bridge layer requires only two combat engineers for a ten-minute operation compared to the previous thirty-five engineers for an eighty-minute operation. The newer towed artillery pieces require a crew of six, versus previous operations requiring crews of eight for the Soltam M68 and eleven for the M114. The disadvantage to fewer personnel is that initial training becomes more expensive for each individual and personnel losses are tougher to replace.



Simulation is also being used. The Air Force is using simulators for helicopters and A-4 aircraft. The Army has an individual and section marksmanship trainer and close quarters battle building. The Navy has built a damage control tower in addition to various ship simulators and trainers. This complements a trend found in the United States military and evident in Singapore's military to outsource support functions to private enterprise wherever possible.

Singapore is committed to ensuring that it maintains a technology and capability edge. To this end, the construction of the Changi Naval Base will permit operations capable of supporting United States aircraft carriers. This is a significant step forward in supporting the platforms which contribute to regional stability and can counter the Theater Ballistic Missile threat.

Currently, Singapore is conducting a competition for its attack helicopter program. America's entry in the competition is Boeing's Apache AH-64D. Singapore's MINDEF is presently evaluating Boeing's offer along with helicopters from South Africa, Europe, and Russia.

In the future, Singapore will begin phasing out its fleet of A-4s and F-5s. Recent orders for additional F-16's have validated their proven performance to the Air Force, and place them as a competitor for future assets in Singapore's fighter competition to take them well into the twenty-first century.

Defensively, Singapore is upgrading its AB PS-70/R Giraffe 40 radar and is considering an upgrade to its I-Hawk SAM system. In combination with other platforms, Singapore will be able to significantly strengthen its defensive shield.

The Future

In July of 1997, financial difficulties forced the government of Thailand to devalue the Thai baht. The economic tidal waves that were sent across the region have been staggering. Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Malaysia have all experienced devaluations in their currencies. With its fundamentally sound economy, Singapore's currency has been devalued less dramatically than its neighbors with the result that the Singaporean currency is now much stronger relative to its neighbors.

These financial problems may not spell the end of military equipment purchases in the area, but they have certainly taken the steam out of some of the items being considered. As of this writing, several regional countries have either canceled or delayed projects totaling \$1.8 billion. It is clear the amount of money that countries throughout ASEAN can devote to defense spending will be limited for several years to come.

Singapore will continue to possess one of the finest integrated militaries in the region. Singapore's keen sense of diplomacy and economic policy has helped preserve an environment of peace. For a country that has a vivid memory of occupation by the Japanese during World War II, and anti-Chinese riots during the fifties and sixties, they are not willing to put all of their eggs in one basket. Singapore's multiple approach of good economics, sound diplomacy, and a strong deterrence is a strategy that works.

Like Singapore, the United States believes strongly in the synergy of diplomacy, economics, and deterrence to avoid armed conflict. Singapore's commitment for peace, in a partnership that strategically positions America and Singapore for success in the years ahead, appears to be a recipe for success. Security assistance, a key ingredient in this success, should not be overlooked or taken for granted. Strategic partnership is a well-considered strategy to strengthen America's national security strategy. Our relationship with Singapore is an integral part of that strategy.